

## Body memories

### *A conversation with Sanna Kekäläinen\**

**K.:** As you already know, the next issue of our magazine will be dedicated to the figure of Jane Avril. Hence the desire for this conversation, because your work seems to us to evoke that of Avril. About Jane Avril’s dance we read that her movements were irregular and unexpected, as if they existed when they were made. For this very reason, we would like to begin by asking which your relationship is with improvisation.

**Sanna Kekäläinen:** I think it’s an interesting question, because I have used improvisation throughout my working career as a tool to start with in the studio in the very beginning. I work on a structure and on a thinking system of the becoming work which I prepare quite long before the first studio rehearsal even starts. This research period usually takes about two years and during that time I developed the structure. I think structure as such is a very unconscious element, so during my research of a topic I’m working on the structure which builds itself in my mind. Then, it’s time to start to realize the work; to start the work in the studio with this huge structure which is completely literal and intellectual. The work in the studio I do happens not in a controlled way, absolutely not so, maybe this is improvisation. This “improvisational” work in the studio then takes such a long time, so it definitely becomes non-improvisational. It starts to build an own structure and architecture out of the intellectual structure and suddenly after a couple of months the work is there. I don’t do improvisational things in performances or during the pieces I’ve made and performed. It might be very close, but the difference is it’s so structured; in a kind of multiple way, and the structure is clear. Therefore, it is not improvisational, I think.

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\* Sanna Kekäläinen was interviewed by Irene Calabrò and Stefania Guglielmo. Sanna Kekäläinen is a Finnish contemporary dancer and performer, artistic lead of Kekäläinen & Company. She studied in Helsinki, London, and Amsterdam. She has created over 70 works, in which she explores how “very private things experienced in the body” are connected to philosophical, political, social issues.  
<https://www.kekalainencompany.net/wp/en/company/sanna-kekalainen/>

The structure of the piece is there and the things, the scenes, the materials. In my performance there is this bedrock structure which I rely on and which I take the food out to free the body and mind during the performance. So, it's a very peculiar relationship with improvisation I have.



*Puna – Red – Rouge* (2007). Photo: Heli Rekula. In the photo: Sanna Kekäläinen.

**K.:** We would like to continue this conversation by shifting the focus to your relationship with classical and modern dance, thus with the traditional dance code. As we read in her *Memoirs*, Jane Avril openly rejects the institution of classical dance. It seems to us that even in her work there is a rejection of this, thus a rejection of the codes of dance. Is this really the case and in what sense?

**S. K.:** I was educated in London in both ballet and different contemporary dance techniques, so ballet will always be in my body memory, it never disappears, it's there. Still my relationship with ballet is very critical. I think ballet is totally unfair, breeds ridiculous role models, it's unhealthy, it's outdated, it's

politically incorrect. It is part of our dance history, yes, but I think it is overvalued as an art form. I think the gaze should be transformed into something more human and responsive for today's world we live in.

**K.:** You say that the classical dance in is in your body memory. Which is its role in your structures?

**S. K.:** I'm working with the unconscious mind and the moving body, not with a form, especially not with a form of classical dance. I rather think movement something else than a form, so classical dance has no conscious role on my structures. After my dance education I worked intensively to deconstruct my body language to find the connection between the unconscious mind and the body. I had learned a certain way of training and moving and being in the body, so I think it's very much to do with deconstructing the whole of what I did learn what I had gone through during my education.

**K:** There are some bodies that do not find a place in traditional ballet, particularly bodies with disabilities, bodies that cannot move at all, bodies that are "ugly" or not beautiful according to standards. How have you worked on the relationship with the body and disability or in general on the relationship between stage space and the "ugly body"?

**S. K.:** First I do not think bodies are ugly. Bodies are unique, different, unexpected and that is what makes them fascinating. Yes, I have worked with a disabled dancer, we worked very closely as it was a duet. We actually ended up working on the floor on the floor level, her legs weren't able to support her weight because of the symptom she was born with. She was also very fragile, she couldn't take weight, so we did things in the limits of our bodies and developed an interesting way of moving, communicating, so we communicated with the bodies we had. I'm quite tall, so we were the opposites of the physical existence, if you like.

Back to your question about "the ugly body": I introduced the (so called) ugly female body in my early works during the years of research and deconstruction of my movement and mind.



*Hafed Collage of Differences and Fragility* (2016). Photo: Lilja Lehmuskallio.

In the photo: Sanna Kekäläinen, Maija Karhunen.

**K.:** Jane Avril was admitted to the Salpêtrière hospital among the “great stars of hysteria”, but our review wanted to ask whether her experience could really be interpreted entirely from this perspective. Certainly, hysteria possesses a special and essential link with the stage dimension in that it brings the body to the spectacular evidence of its movements. In this sense, we would like to know whether you believe that the link between dance and hysteria still exists, or is it in other senses that dance interrogates the feminine? We ask you this question because your way of dancing seems to tear the form of the spectacle to shreds; your work is often associated with hysteria but at the same time you are very critical to the capitalistic society of spectacle; what do you think about this link between hysteria and spectacle? The aim of this operation is to reveal the silent and innocent knowledge that lurks beneath the image through the body. So, we would like to understand together with you how, in the capitalist universe and in the society of the spectacle, dancing means questioning forms, representations, definitions including those linked to hysteria?

**S. K.:** First, I do not think that there necessarily is a link between dance and hysteria or that hysteria is only (or mainly) a feminine phenomenon. During my classical schooling, I entered feminism rather strongly and felt that the female body was not investigated, gazed at, thought, found, in ways that it should have been. And at that time, it was very much the female body I was focusing on as the male gaze was dominating the stages. I started my first analysis and I wanted to, during the start and the kind of enthusiasm, read this study of Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studien über Hysterie*. Then I made a work I

named after the study, *Studien über Hysterie*. In this work I was very much trying to find ways how to approach hysteria in a physical way on stage or in a public situation so that I'm both aware of what I am stating, what I am representing, and at the same time not aware of it. In the work we are going through these stages I had researched, the stages I thought could resemble hysteria. It was very violent, and I didn't find it feminine at all. The important thing in this work of mine was its structure: a stereophonic structure in which two female performers go through the stages of mind and body in complete privacy with each one's own timing, although none the less both performers do have a strong vraisemblance to each other. This because the idea of hysteria is imitative. I wanted to bring the private in the gaze, and in doing this lies the idea of criticizing the capitalistic society of spectacle: the private stage. So, anything could be hysterical. Anyone could be hysterical. I think a dog could be hysterical, there's no limit.



*Studien über Hysterie zwei* (2017). Photo: Uupi Tirronen. In the photo: Janne Marja-aho.

**K.:** It's an important question for us because we work on images, cinema, and all forms of representation, in a political way. And so, for us, it's a very crucial question, contemporary form of spectacle. For this reason, our question is fundamental: the relationship between hysteria and capitalistic universe of the spectacle. Because for us, the two theme are very linked today.

**S. K.:** Maybe all this what we now are seeing or what we are made to see, maybe the hysteria of today is all this disastrous violence what we're confronting and made to purchase and all this violence of the image, the self-image, the symbolic violence.

**K.:** And so you think that the spectacle of the capitalistic universe is a sort of new hysteria? Come again? Do you think that the spectacle in capitalistic universe is a sort of new hysteria?

**S. K.:** I'm suggesting. I don't know. I'm just asking questions. I think we are getting into a state on this planet which is very difficult to understand anymore.

**K.:** Jacques Derrida talks about the link between writing and space. It is possible to enjoy your work without ever meeting you in person. This is what happened to us. We were able to view your photo and video archives and read a lot of the written material about you that circulates in printed form or on the web. Our impression is that there is a strong connection between dance and writing. In a first sense, this may mean that dance is writing: the body is like the text that is traced in the airspace. Secondly, dance is about a certain need for writing: many dancers write; Jane Avril herself signs an autobiography; finally, many other dancers solicit the writing of others, are portrayed or described by other people. In what way do you consider this link between writing and danced gesture valid? Can the dance body be associated with the body of the text in terms of space management and the relationship to the other? Is the dancer's body a solitary body? Is its solitude absolute and radical?

**S. K.:** I have been working from the pre-verbal. So, my relationship to writing, if considering the work of art and what I do as work of art, is very complex. I cannot see writing. Of course, when I read a book or when I'm studying something I see the text. But then when in process of creating something because it's so heavily driven from the pre-verbal, the earlier stages of existence, I don't know if I can really judge it as writing, what I produce to the works. I think the material, the words are unconsciously pushing through.

It's more the body that is actually writing than the mind, the intellectual mind. I am writing with the body. But then do I think the link between writing and dance gesture is valid? Yes, I very much do think so. I think moving the body is very much writing with the body.

I have lived with a writer for quite a long time, so I've seen how the writing happens, not just to write stories but rather a complex emergency of an architecture with words and patterns of meanings. I find it very similar what I do.

About dancer's body being a solitary body: I think the moving body is never solitary because of the memory it carries.

So, you ask, can the dance body be associated with the body of the text in terms of space management and the relationship to the others? Yes, it can, and it does. I think if one is building a work of art, like when I'm building a piece, It's the similar rules or similar layers to go through when building a text.

**K.:** When you dance, are you alone in your body or when you dance is there a strong connection between your body and others? We mean both others who are actually present and others who are away from the place where the dance takes place.

**S. K.:** One of my working themes is sharing the space. If it happens to be a situation, a representation of being literally alone on "stage", still I don't think there is a thing called a solitary situation because one is never alone there.



*Private – Narcissism Remix* (2014). Photo: Lilja Lehmuskallio. In the photo: Sanna Kekäläinen.

**K.:** We can define dance as something that happens in the present: dance is linked to the instantaneous and ephemeral forms of expression in which it manifests itself. However, in contemporary times, dance is invested by the tendency to archive. It is as if, through dance, one wanted first and foremost to archive and pass on stories of bodies, often of women. These are probably stories that can only be written down, recorded, and reproduced through body writing. What impact do the technical archiving possibilities available from time to time have on your work? And what is the relationship between your body and the technical means of archiving?

**S. K.:** We live in the digital world so now it's not anymore the case that dance happens in an instant. It can be recorded; it can be streamed. Everything what I've done has been archived. When we work on something which is so thin, it's thin air, there is a need to get it somehow stowed, to have it somewhere, to have some kind of proof of it. You ask is it as if through dance one wanted first and foremost to archive and pass on stories, on bodies of women. Maybe it was needed because there were not enough stories of women. Take the history of Western art, you go back only to the last century, and there's considerably less stories of women. In all forms of art, this possibility to create a personal archive is a way to create a new story.

I think it's about creating oneself. Building oneself. Recognized images because archiving means images. Performing, experiencing, a work of live art, is not an image or images. It is inside. It is feeling and thinking and existing in different states. But when you enter images, archiving is solely images. What is my identity when I am there, in the image? Who is that? It is different from "the real".

**K.:** And what is the relationship between your body and the technical means of archiving?

**S. K.:** My body is images in my mind. Feelings, judgments, thinking. In archived images a question emerges: Do I represent something? Who or what do I represent? Do I present, this "ugly body"? And how it has been gazed at? So, I think these technical means of archiving are brutal. Do I see the truth through the means? Is there a connection between mind and corporeal existence and experiences and what I put out of it? Or is it all in the images?





*Shared Space and Things We Need* (2023). Photo: Pietari Purovaara. In the photo: Sanna Kekäläinen.